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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 000325

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR P, NEA/IR, DRL/NESCA, AF/S

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2020

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL SA

SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA UNDECIDED ON HOW TO RESPOND TO IRAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

REF: SECSTATE 12108

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: DIRCO Chief Director of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Pitso Montwedi claims that while South Africa does have very serious concerns with human rights violations in Iran, his department has received no direction from higher-ups on an official stance. Following a high-level visit from Tehran officials in December and simultaneous pressure from the Canadian Foreign Minister, Montwedi claims neither the Presidency nor the Foreign Minister have communicated a strategy for dealing with Iran. End summary.

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SETTING THE STAGE  
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¶2. (U) Montwedi began by explaining current ties between the SAG and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (GOI). He explained that Iran is South Africa's biggest supplier of oil and an important player in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). As a way of explaining the GOI's tactics, Montwedi gave the example of the GOI establishing the NAM Center for Human Rights in Tehran, which they intend as a center for research and the repository of all NAM human rights literature. He explained that in NAM culture, once a partner country makes such an "offer", it is very difficult for other countries to contest or question the appropriateness of the gesture. Montwedi asserted that the GOI has managed to convince many non-aligned nations that when the USG raises human rights violations in Iran, the discussion is really politically motivated and meant as a punishment for President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denialism. According to Montwedi, Ahmadinejad has managed to equate investigating human rights violations in Iran with "jumping on the bandwagon with the West."

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FALLOUT FROM DECEMBER  
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¶3. (C) Montwedi shared that in December, after South Africa abstained from voting on the Iran resolution in the Third Committee session of the UN, a high level delegation from Tehran paid a visit to South Africa. He says they came to register their grievance with the SAG's change in vote (Note: South Africa has historically voted no on Iran resolutions. End note) and ask why they were not at least consulted if the SAG had concerns with Iran's human rights record. Montwedi says the Iranian envoys further expected South Africa to "correct" what they perceived as a mistake. He added that Deputy Minister of DIRCO Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim was

unequivocal in expressing South Africa's very serious concerns with the human rights situation in Iran and said the envoys admitted that Iran had experienced very serious violations, but also asserted that all countries have human rights problems. The envoys continued to protest the use of the General Assembly to run the resolution, asserting that it should have been introduced in the Human Rights Committee (HRC). Montwedi says the SAG has not yet responded to the government of Iran's concerns, despite pressure from his division to articulate their position.

¶4. (C) While the Iranians were in South Africa, Montwedi says the Foreign Minister of Canada was sending daily letters thanking the SAG for the change in vote and encouraging further change. He says the SAG has also not responded to these letters.

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INTERNAL ENGAGEMENT  
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¶5. (U) Montwedi advised that the South Africa-Iran Binational Commission will take place this month in Pretoria and that Ebrahim made sure that human rights issues were included on the agenda. This week in Cape Town, Ebrahim will also meet with the local Baha'i community, which has expressed concern over arbitrary detentions of their members in Iran. They will discuss recent developments in Tehran including the execution of two protesters, the nine additional slated to be executed and the hundreds still in detention without charge.

¶6. (C) Poloff asked why the Speaker of Parliament, Max

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Sisulu, recently visited Tehran and whether his visit had anything to do with the fallout from the December UN vote. Montwedi asserted that Sisulu went to Tehran for parliament-to-parliament dialogue and to report to the SA Cabinet on Iran's laws relating to women, homosexuals, etc. He also thought Sisulu was pushing the Cabinet to articulate the SAG's position on Iran.

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NO ANSWERS  
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¶7. (C) Montwedi complained that his department is rudderless since the change in administration. He lamented that the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) Maite Nkoana-Mashabane is always out of the country and has not clearly delineated portfolios for the two Deputy Ministers so there is no coherence in policy formulation. In the lead up to the Iran vote in December, Montwedi says different missions were delivering demarches to one or the other Deputy Minister -- sometimes simultaneously-- and with no communication between the two. To give an example of the lack of clarity, Montwedi explained that the South African Ambassador to the United Nations office at Geneva, Ambassador Jerry Matjila, arrived in Switzerland slightly more than one week ago and is already overwhelmed and lacking instruction from Mashabane. Leading up to the Universal Periodic Review for Iran, Matjila is inclined to make no comment because he has no instructions from his superiors. Montwedi thinks this would be disastrous because "saying nothing says something" and feels other nations would question whether South Africa is withdrawing from human rights conversations altogether or giving Iran implicit support.

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